

Gustavo Melo Cerqueira & Danielle N. Boaz - Religious Racism

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SPEAKERS

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Tanner Randall 00:03

We acknowledge with respect the Onondaga Nation, Fire Keepers of the Haudenosaunee the indigenous people on whose land Syracuse University now stand. May the information you glean from this podcast motivate you to uphold indigenous values protect Mother Earth and honor indigenous treaties. America takes religious freedom for granted. In other countries, people face violence, threats, and panoptic influence from hatred. Today, we'll talk about Brazil's fight for religious equality. Welcome to the doctrine of Christian discovery. I'm Tanner Randall, your host from good faith media. We're producing this podcast at the religious origins of white supremacy conference in December of 2023 at Syracuse University in New York. This year is particularly special because it's the 100th anniversary of Johnson V. Macintosh, the supreme court proceeding that installed the framework of the doctrine of discovery within American government. We will be talking about the different ramifications of the doctrine of discovery and how it led to indigenous values and land being stolen as well as white supremacy and the general idea of revitalized indigenous culture. religious discourse is dominated by those with mass amounts of followers, but it's important to remember those that do not have the same populations, they can have the best appreciation for environment and beautiful displays of worship. If we do not protect these we risk losing culture and what it means to be unique humans. We would like to thank our sponsors who made this podcast possible. Many thanks to the Henry Luce Foundation, Syracuse University, indigenous values initiative, American Indian law Alliance, American Indian community house good faith media, to tiara and towards our common public life. We appreciate your support. I'm Tanner Randall with Good Faith Media. Today, our episode will have two guests. First we'll speak with Dr. Gustavo cicada, an activist from Brazil who's combating religious racism. After that, we'll speak to Dr. Danielle boas, Dr. Boulez helps also combat religious racism internationally. And Dr. Bow has organization can be found at religious racism.org. I'm here with Dr. Gustavo Melo Cerqueira welcome. My first question for you here today is, what is religious racism? Tell us about a little bit. Okay,

Gustavo Melo Cerqueira 03:03

thank you so much for having me here. So this very idea of religious racism comes from Brazil, from the social activists in Brazil, especially those who used to deal with what we used to call religious intolerance. But the point is that because we, the main victim of what people call religious intolerance, in very violent and diversified ways, are the people who belong to the afro Brazilian religions, especially Candomblé and Umbanda. And because of that, people started to say, No, this is not about religious intolerance. This is about religious racism. And these idea of the religious racism is very connected to the very concept of structural racism that we also talk in Brazil, which is about the ways in which our socio political cultural relationships in Brazil are very structured into anti blackness. And then we couldn't notice that the main point about the ways in which people act violently against us is not because they do not have knowledge or because any kind of ignorance, it is much more because of anti black racism. So we started using these and then we could also identify that this concept could be used to also different racial groups as also the native peoples from Brazil, who are also suffering a lot in terms of religious racism.

Tanner Randall 04:31

So, I am curious as because this is a topic that is rather new to me. And obviously, within the United States, we have seen the ramifications of religious racism and in the particularly in the 60s and 70s churches being a way of justifying segregation, but what does the manifestation of religious racism look like in Brazil? What are people facing today? A and how does this affect their everyday life?

Gustavo Melo Cerqueira 05:04

Okay, that's very interesting because it's also connected a little bit with the concept of religious racism. Because when we talk about these, many people think about the kind of racist violence that is motivated by religious values. That's okay. But that's not the full point. The full point is also that we're talking about different forms of violence, or the ways in which rights human rights are threatened, and how they impact in a different way, those Afro Brazilian religious communities, for example, sometimes we talk about land rights. And we're also talking about religious racism, because many times these Afro Brazilian religious communities are in certain areas, that they do not have their right guaranteed by the state in terms of ownership. So when we talk about religious racism, we need to face not only what is motivated by religion, but also how they impact in a different way. These are for Brazilian religious communities. And then, in terms of how these affects his eyes, in our everyday lives, there are many ways in which these kinds of violence is manifested. So we were talking about even the most trivial offense that you can listen in the streets, because you are, for example, wearing these necklaces that are very specific for our religion, for example, or just because people see you dressed in white on Fridays, which is also part of our tradition. But also there are many other ways were way more violent. So the cases that we are facing right now they go with the burning of our places of warships. We have some statues in several cities in Brazil also that represents our gods. And these statues are also being burned down and destroyed. There are several people in Brazil, especially elderly women, who died because of the ways in which neo Pentecostal evangelicals were kind of circling the place of worship and sang several offensive to them, and throwing stones and trying to burn those temples as well. There were several leaders, Barbary chars, as I am in Brazil, who were killed in a certain area of Brazil, in the north of Brazil, in a certain area, about five or six of these Bible, Orishas were killed in a sequence, and nobody could link that kind of crime to any absolutely anything, because they did not

steal anything, nothing, they just were killed, and then come on trace the common characteristics about those victims is that they were bubble reshares. Right. So we're talking about teenagers that go to school, and also they need to wear some of those parts of these adornments that belong to our religion. And some of them have been beat up by their colleagues as well. Sometimes a professor or teacher just says, oh, you should leave these because you are worshipping the devil. And there are the other cases that are not so clearly motivated by religion. But that affect us, as I was telling you about the case of the rain, right? So we heard a yellow Orishas, who was killed recently, in, in a space in an area in Bahia, which is the state where I have my mighty Heydo, my place of worship, and she was killed because there was a dispute in terms of the extraction of food in trees, to sell to other people. So since that was an area of Columbo in that area was not certified, those kinds of conflicts become pretty, pretty frequent. And right now I'm also giving some assistance to another Babalorixá Orisha, who's also facing something similar in a city that's really close to the city where I have my two heroes as well. So and also, we can talk about the guardian of children. It's becoming very common in Brazil, that lots of people are having their children extracted from their families, because of the religion of the mother and the religion of the father who follow Afro Brazilian traditions.

Tanner Randall 09:18

First of all, I'm so sorry for your communal loss in the injustice as the your communities had to face. No one should have to go through that. And it is a ramification of people trying to insert some kind of moral hierarchy. And this week, we've been talking about the doctrine of discovery and how it asserts that, you know, whoever is backed by a certain religious group has the right of domination, and that's something we need to work to tear down. And so I think that, you know, you've obviously been very involved in your community and been doing work and without people like you, we have no hope of doing I mean not to thank you. I do. I do have a question because I think it's important to learn about other religions. And it's important to speak them into Word because then they become permanent. So I was wondering, for some of our listeners who may not be familiar with, you say, pronounce it Babylonia Shang.

Gustavo Melo Cerqueira 10:19

Yeah.

Tanner Randall 10:20

Can you explain what that religion entails and what it means to you? Yeah, Babalorixá is the male leader of a religion named Candomblé. And I'm going to talk a little bit about Candomblé as well. So and the female leader is named Iyalorixá. Right. So Candomblé was a religion that was made in Brazil, that serves in Brazil, because of the different cultures and the different ethnicities that come from Africa, especially during slavery, right. So it was a way of guarantee that these people could worship their, their gods, their Orishas, as we say, but then we have different names for them as well, we can say what he shows, but in some cases, we are talking about what they call Voodooos, depending on the ethnicity or what we call in cases. But the point is that these gods, they manifest some different characteristics of the nature. And also they represent, in a sense some of our ancestors. So, for example, I am initiated for Ilê Axé, who's the hunter. And also it is kind of the God that represents more what we call the CATO nation. And the CATO is a city that's now is located, where now is the country of Benning. So it was a Yoruba city, but also surrounded by a different ethnicity, which was the form

people. So we have those different cultures in dialogue since Africa, and they keep this dialogue as well. And when they go to Brazil, so then the theology of Colombia is very complex. It's really similar sometimes to the Indian mythology. And it's similar also to the Greek mythology or the Roman mythology, when we you have different gods that are related to different aspects of nature. And they have different forms of worship, as well. And also they kind of guide our lives. But we also can't ask them to influence us positively. I can imagine you're speaking to Africa and are about Africa and Brazil, I can imagine those being places that are so vibrant with, you know, ancestry and nature being extremely spiritual place. And I know you mentioned some land encroachment issues earlier. And I think it's very difficult for groups to understand, especially those that come from the Christian faith, to comprehend the spiritual ties there are to an environment. So it's very soothing to hear that there are also other sects of religion that put that kind of importance on environment and preserving ancestry through locations of space. One

Gustavo Melo Cerqueira 13:10

of the things that we're also doing is that we keep our work in in terms of the resistance and on how we can combat religious racism. So particularly, I've been working a lot in the political incidents, especially the international political incidents. So these are scholarly work that we're trying to develop in terms of religious racism has to do with it. But also my participate in my participation in different instances, like, sometimes I need to participate in some committees of the United Nations in Geneva in Switzerland, sometimes I need to come to the west, also to participate in some other committees in audiences that we can have in Washington, especially when they are related to the organization of the American states. So we are also trying to find a way of giving international visibility to what we are suffering in Brazil, because we feel that international pressure over Brazilian state is something very, very important to make Brazilian states to actually do something that can be effective in our defense.

Tanner Randall 14:11

Now I am joined by Dr. Danielle Boaz, and we're going to talk about the boots on the ground initiatives in Brazil to combat religious racism. So Dr. Boaz, why don't you tell me a little bit about your advocacy work in your involvement with the fight for equality in Brazil? Sure,

Danielle N. Boaz 14:39

absolutely. So the first thing that I want to say is that I'm not Brazilian, and I'm based in the US and so a lot of the advocacy work that I'm doing is to try to augment, give visibility to the work that is already occurring in Brazil and also to make things that are currently only in Portuguese available to an English speaking audience, especially to folks in the US folks in Canada, folks in Europe, who may be largely unaware of the really dire circumstances for Afro Brazilian religious communities today. So all of the work that I'm doing is, of course, building off of what they're doing. And I've been doing work related to combating religious racism, and to help religious Afro Brazilian religious communities experienced equality in Brazil, I've been doing that works for about five years or so. And it builds off a legacy of work that I've been doing for longer than I care to admit, because I'm going to date myself if I do about just discrimination and violence against African diaspora religious communities throughout the Americas and in Europe, and a little bit on the African continent as well. So I was no stranger to this work before I got started. And then I met Dr. Cerqueira, in 2018. And he basically told me, Look, things are terrible here. If you think you work on this, you don't even know what's going on. And you need to come to

Brazil, and you're really going to see, and that's exactly what I did. A few months later, I went to Brazil. And he very kindly took me around. And one of the things that people repeatedly said is we need to give visibility to what's happening here. We need to make sure that people abroad are fighting for us, they're talking about what's happening, because what's happening here is perhaps amounting to a genocide. It's definitely terrorism. It's definitely intended to wipe out these religious communities. And so about a year later, I started working on a project tracking and mapping cases of discrimination and violence against Afro Brazilian religious communities. And you can find that at my website, religiousracism.org. And right now, we have 500 cases of discrimination and violence against Afro Brazilian religious communities. And these are cases that are modern day happening since the year 2000. And going forward, most of them are happening within the last, I would say, five to 10 years for sure. And these are cases that range everything from just simple vandalism, for example, writing some graffiti, which is usually biblical graffiti, on the side of religious temples, saying, This territory belongs to Jesus or the blood of Jesus has power, or something to that effect, normally, all the way up to extreme acts of violence, like murdering devotees, priests, religious leaders of Africa, diaspora of Afro Brazilian religions, and everything in between their cases of bombings, arson, shootings, stonings, that's always the one that gives people a little bit of positive stoning. What exactly does that mean in the 21st century, we don't hear about that. But it's something that is fairly common in Brazil these days, that people are gathering around Afro Brazilian temples, usually while they're in ceremony, or while typically elderly religious leaders might be inside alone. And they're just learned launching large stones at the sides or at the tops of the buildings. And in particular, the roofs of the buildings are most vulnerable to the stones actually coming through and harming people. So sometimes they're targeting those in hopes that they will actually have these large stones fall on people and injure them. And this is a way of trying to scare intimidate people and drive them out. And so what we're trying to do in tracking and mapping these cases, is to give tools to the people in Brazil to talk about the gravity to talk about the widespread nature, the systematic nature of what's happening there. Because as I'm sure Dr. Cerqueira probably already told you, the tendency of the Brazilian government is to just kind of say, Oh, well, this isn't really something that's a big problem. Here. We just have a fight between neighbors. And that's why somebody attacked a devotee of an afro Brazilian religion. It isn't really religious racism, it isn't really discrimination. It is just something that's happening within the community. It's an interpersonal dispute, or in the most discriminatory circumstances. They're saying that Oh, Oh, well, this is because these communities are associated with drugs or some terrible stereotype that is 99 times out of 100. untrue. They're saying, well, oh, they were probably dealing with the drug dealers here. And so the drug dealers came in and murdered this priest. It wasn't because people are discriminating against them. It's not religious racism, it's not religious intolerance. It's just, they're involved with some shady people.

Tanner Randall 20:29

Okay, that's shocking. And we thank you for your work. It's obviously a very pressing issue. And I think that something you said that's going to stick with me for a long time is this behavior is moving towards genocide, which that is, these are the seeds of genocide, people are made to feel unsafe in their everyday life, and whether it be graffiti or dismissal of tragedies. That's what we see time and time again, around the world before something truly terrible happens. And so I think it's extremely important we bring attention to this issue. And so I guess I have a question of, How can young people get involved? I know, you said that you're translating a lot of stuff from you, from Portuguese to English. And trying to put more information about this topic out there. So what, what are you doing on the

ground to try to curb some of this terrible behavior by a majority group? And how can our listeners help?

Danielle N. Boaz 21:44

So we actually have a newly formed community called the working group on race, justice and Africana religions. It's an international coalition of scholars and practitioners, mostly practitioners, some of whom are also happened to be scholars who are engaging in various projects that are designed to help combat certain aspects of discrimination and violence against all religious communities throughout the African diaspora. This includes everything from the communities in Brazil to a century of Lukumi, which is a Yoruba religion coming out of Cuba to Voodoo in Haiti, to hoodoo U.S. tradition. And we even have members who are also Black Muslims and thinking about the way that race and discrimination against Muslims, Islamophobia, impacts black communities differently sometimes. And so one of the easiest things that people can do if they are interested in having an active role is to reach out to us at our website, we have all of our email addresses and social media contacts, and we have an Instagram page for the working group, and see what different projects we have going on. We're in the process of because the working group is new, we don't have all the projects posted on our website just yet. But we're talking about them on our social media page. And, and see what you'd like to be involved in, we've got people advocating for land rights, we've got people working through the arts, working through dance, working through theatre to give visibility to what's happening, we have all sorts of different projects. So there are ways for pretty much anybody who has any kind of expertise and desire and energy into anything to come and be involved. And the other thing that people can do is to use the data that we're making available. That's precisely why we're putting these cases together is so that scholars and it's a bilingual resource. So Dr. Cerqueira helped me to translate everything back into Portuguese. And to make sure that everything's available, all the data is equally available in English and Portuguese. And the idea is that English speaking scholars, Portuguese speaking scholars, they can take this data and activist as well, of course, they can take this data and use it to identify trends and the cases that maybe I myself am not seeing as a scholar, or to highlight certain areas. A big thing is land rights, for example, thinking about how communities are being pushed off their lands by companies who want to develop it by the state sometimes. And so if we can find people who want to create solidarity across different efforts to ensure that indigenous communities, African communities, various peoples have access to their land, then those are ways that we can collaborate. Those are ways that we can collect data and talk about how what's happening in Brazil is similar to other places and continue to give visibility to the situation. But also to continue to understand what's happening. One of the main things that I think is important here is that there's this kind of global hesitancy to call any Christian group extremists or terrorists. But what's happening in Brazil, the attacks against Afro Brazilian religious communities are being led by extremist sects of evangelical Christianity. They are terrorists by pretty much every definition. The groups who are carrying out these attacks, they intend to intimidate they intend to terrorize, they intend to harm, and they are carrying out very serious attacks that are that are harmful to human life. But we hesitate to name them as such, these resources are intended to make that hesitancy go away, because we have the data to back it up. But we need more people to engage with the work that we're doing to engage with these resources, to publish things about it, to bring it up as an example at different meetings that they're having in different reports that they're generating. So it's also engaging with the data as well as engaging with us individually, there are lots of ways to get involved. That's

Tanner Randall 26:19

one thing that always just frustrates me, to no end is the hesitancy to not call, you know, white supremacy groups or evangelical nationalists, like they're in Brazil, terrorist groups, that's what they are. They're intimidating, they're hurting and they're causing irreparable amounts of harm to families. So we thank you for your work. And what can we get that website one more time? Sure.

Danielle N. Boaz 26:44

religiousracism.org

Tanner Randall 26:50

Thank you so much.

Danielle N. Boaz 26:51

Thank you.

Tanner Randall 26:58

Thanks for listening to this episode of the doctrine of Christian discovery recorded at the 2023 Religious Origins of White Supremacy Conference at Syracuse University in New York. This podcast is produced in collaboration between Good Faith Media, Syracuse University, and the Indigenous Values Initiative. I'm Tanner Randall for Good Faith Media. Our executive producers are Mitch Randall of Good Faith Media Philip P. Arnold and Sandy Bigtree of the Indigenous values initiative and Adam DJ Brett Syracuse University and the American Indian law Alliance. Our producer is Cliff Vaughn and our editor is David Pang. Our music comes from Pond5. Production assistance provided by the American Indian Law Alliance. To learn more go to doctrineofdiscovery.org.